

Illustration Packet
Dr. Patrick J. Rusz, Director of Wildlife Programs
Michigan Wildlife Conservancy



Photo of cougar taken by Jim Deutsch on property of Larry Lippert in western Alcona County in August 1997.



Photo of cougar taken by George White on hunt club property in eastern Oscoda County, in 1993, just five miles from the 1997 Alcona County photo.

From: Lawrence Robinson
To: John Hendrickson, Tim Reis
Date: Wed, Jul 15, 1998 1:04 pm
Subject: Cougar sighting

This is a note I absolutely dread writing. I don't know if Glen talked to you yet, but I had the terrible misfortune of seeing the Alcona Co. cougar. On July 6, I was picking up the bear baits on routes in Alcona and Oscoda counties. It was pouring rain and I was soaked-ass wet and driving between bait sites. I was on a sandy, narrow USFS road when I came over a rise and a cougar was in the road about 60 yards away. It immediately bolted into the brush. I stopped and looked at the fresh tracks. They were in soft sand and were very clear impressions showing the cat had been walking on the road toward me until I appeared. It angled across the trail taking a couple bounds before leaving the road.

I did not have my camera in the truck to take pictures of the tracks. I drove to a gas station north of Comins and bought a little disposable Kodak camera. I returned to take pictures of the tracks and area. The camera only focused to 4' or more, but the pictures are good enough to show they are cat tracks. I used a folding knife and my boot track for a size reference in the photos.

I told Glen about it and how reluctant I was to say anything after dealing with Larry Lippert's cougar picture last year. I still get letters and calls about the "Alcona County Cougar". Last year I was hounded by most of the news reporters in the state, all the people who ever think they saw a cougar, most of the people who have seen U.F.O.'s, and several people who have reported Elvis is still alive. I have always been very skeptical about the cougar sightings we get from all over the state. So, you can understand why I wish this hadn't happened.

The location was between secs 31 and 32, T26N, R5E, Alcona County. It was on USFS 4435 about 3/10 mile south of USFS 4001. It was an adult animal and there were no other tracks around. I can't even give you a guess on weight, but the pictures show how deep the tracks were in comparison to my tracks.

I figured I had to fess up eventually. What do I do to get the pictures and info to our division files without this getting out to the media? I really don't want this to turn into another media event like the picture last year did. Let me know your suggestions.

By the way, the location is about 10 miles "as the cougar flies" from the Lippert property where the picture was taken last summer.

CC: Glen Matthews

FIRING LINE

Cougar Conundrum

In reference to your excellent Parting Shot on the cougar debate (March 2004), as a southern Michigan DNR field biologist (now retired) I have investigated a number of "panther" reports in the past. I became pretty jaundiced about claimed sightings. Some were clearly hoaxes while others were errors of scale or products of libation.

One was reported by township police and investigated by a conservation officer, who reported the tracks (with nail marks) led to a subdivision where a leg was lifted on a mailbox post. I read another report of a chance sighting accompanied by a photo taken at a 45-degree angle down of a cougar lying on what looked like lawn—pretty close!

But, in 1998, while conducting a spring deer pellet survey near Hubbard

Lake, in Club Country, I came upon a clear set of cougar tracks in the mud by a beaver flooding. I somewhat reluctantly reported them to the Atlanta Field Office, and discussed them with the DNR's cat researcher, Richard Earl. I had joined the ranks of the misguided!

Later, biologist Elaine Carlson told me of a caller reporting that a cat had walked under his archery stand and asking if it were legal to shoot it. Elaine assumed that was an after-the-fact query.

I don't doubt that that cat escaped from or was released by a pet owner who could no longer care for it. Surely, if there are any other cougars out there, they are feral releases, and, if they survive long enough, should provide opportunity for responsible substantiation.

Like Kingsley's Water Babies, you can't prove something doesn't exist unless you can observe it not existing, but as for a wild remnant population, I remain a doubting Thomas!

JON ROYER, Beulab

Dennis Knickerbocker's Parting Shot ("Great Cougar Debate") was a cheap shot. His criticism of the Michigan Wildlife Conservancy and my cougar research simply parroted erroneous reporting that was recently printed in two other Michigan outdoor magazines.

Knickerbocker did not contact me or anyone else at the Conservancy to check the facts; he just accepted the views of another outdoor writer. Had

Knickerbocker bothered to contact me he would have learned:

•Scat samples we sent to a Wyoming lab contained DNA results that were consistent with cougar, not just an unidentified feline (cat). The lab ruled out bobcat based on an analysis of 60 Michigan bobcat tissue samples we sent. Knickerbocker relied on just a small piece of the lab's report and failed to mention Central Michigan University also reported cougar DNA in samples from seven Michigan counties.

•I did not, as he stated, identify as cougar Kalkaska County tracks also reviewed by experts contacted by the Eastern Cougar Network. I looked at a totally different set of tracks 30 days after livestock attacks near South Boardman. The track the experts identified as dog was indeed that of a dog.

•Neither I nor the Conservancy has ever said our evidence is irrefutable proof of a "wild" (emphasis added) resident cougar population. That is our hypothesis, and we do believe that to be true. But we have said, repeatedly, that absolute proof of the origin of any cougar is impossible to obtain, that common sense is the key to getting past the MDNR's notion that any cougars seen must be escaped or released pets.

Knickerbocker stated he is amazed that the Conservancy thinks the burden of proof should be on the skeptics. Darn right it should be. This is an endangered species we're talking about! Biologists should err on the side of caution (read "conservation") and should never simply assume that something that looks like a cougar and behaves like a cougar is not part of our natural heritage. The public deserves better.

Finally, if Knickerbocker wants to believe the cougar that reportedly stalked a volunteer at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore "might have been looking for its owner," then it has probably been doing so for the last two years. That's how long I and many others—including two people with extensive cougar experience out-of-state—have been seeing cougar signs in the same part of the Lakeshore. National Park Service staff has also seen cougars in the same area for more than eight years.

PATRICK J. RUSZ, Ph.D.,
Michigan Wildlife Conservancy

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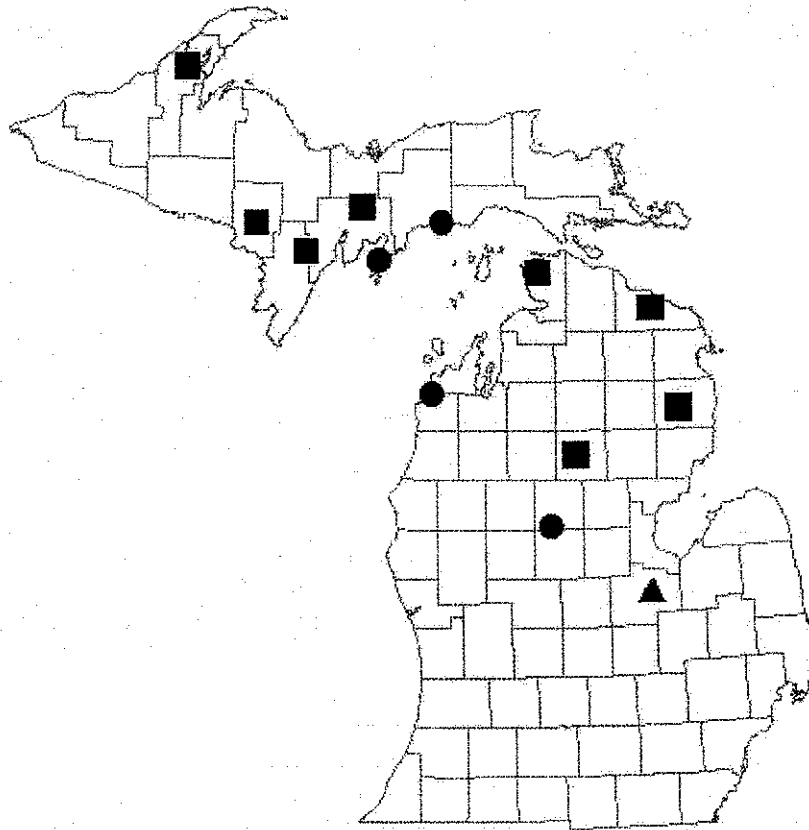
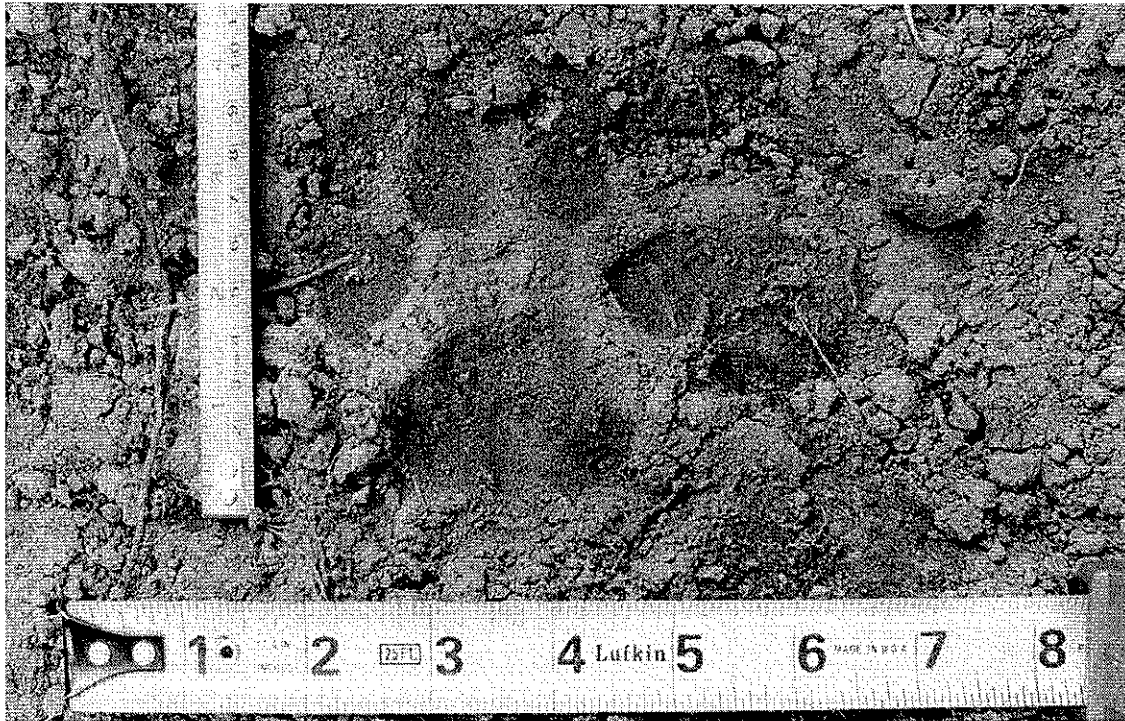


FIG. 1.—Location of search sites for cougar scats. Squares indicate locations where scats were found that showed a cougar DNA profile while the circles indicate sample locations where we did not find genetic evidence of cougars. The location of the pre-Columbian cougar skull is indicated with the triangle. Multiple scats were collected at each site.



Photograph by Michigan Department of Natural Resources of plaster cast of the track of a cougar seen in 1966 by Francis Opolka, who later became a Deputy Director of the MDNR.

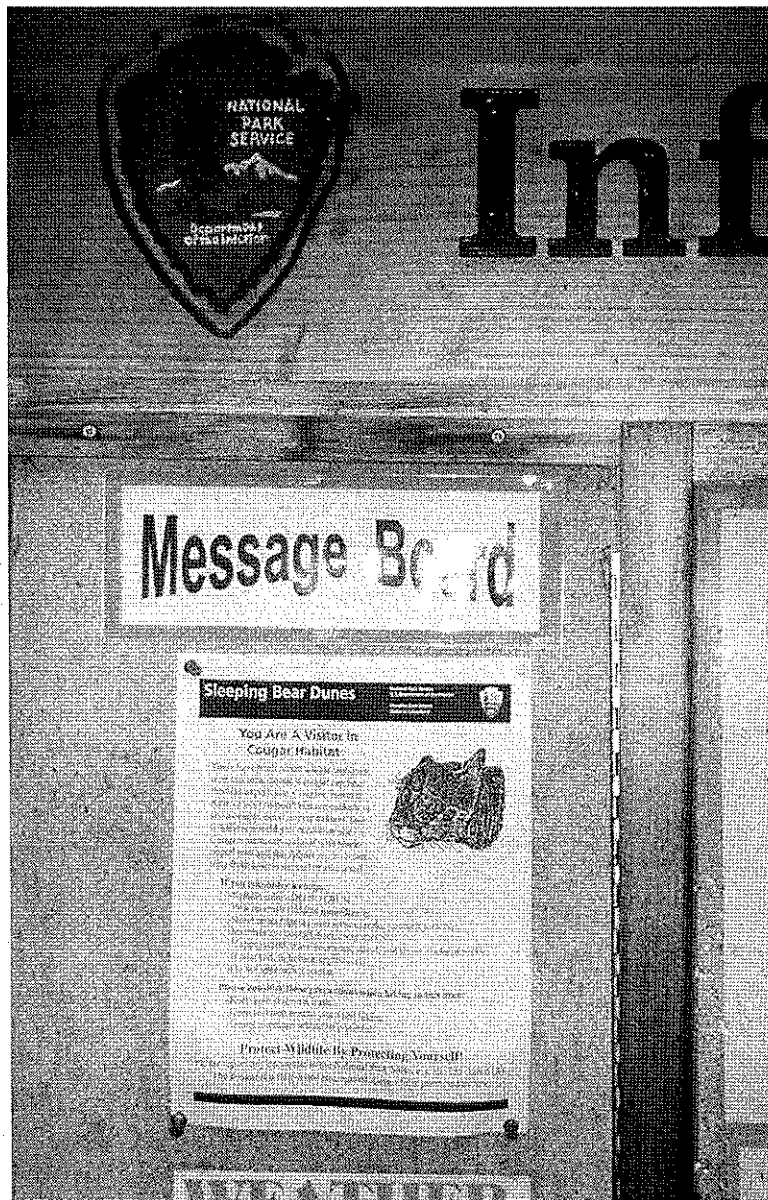


Cougar track found in 2001 in mixed clay and loam in Cheboygan County, Michigan.
Photo by Patrick Ruzs.

In 1994, a book "Endangered and Threatened Wildlife of Michigan," edited by David Evers, was published as the culmination of a long-term project of the Michigan Natural Heritage Program of the DNR. The sections on mammals were reviewed by several prominent DNR wildlife biologists as well as additional naturalists. The section on cougars states: "...several areas throughout its former range, including northern Michigan, may support small populations of cougars... There also are encouraging signs that the Michigan cougar is not transient but occurs in a self-sustaining population—based on several reliable sightings of adult cougars with kittens... The existence of the cougar in Michigan has only been recently confirmed. Whether individuals are from small, remnant populations that survived human pressures through the last two centuries, transients from the western Great Lakes region, or privately released (or escaped) western subspecies, the cougar needs to be recognized, protected, and studied in Michigan's Upper Peninsula."



A horse killed by a cougar in Michigan's Jackson County. Distinct tooth punctures two inches apart are evident on the neck. Photo courtesy of Jackson County Animal Control Office.



Sign at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, in Benzie and Leelanau, Counties that advises visitors they are entering "cougar habitat." The signs were put up by the National Park Service after many years of receiving cougar sighting reports from employees and visitors at the Lakeshore.